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ABSTRACT

The oral proficiency scale of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) and the Educational Testing Service is reviewed as an instrument for measuring the levels of language proficiency for college undergraduates and high school students. The scale is a modification of the U.S. Government's Foreign Service Institute Scale, and its suitability for use in the schools has not been established. It is not clear to what extent the scale's progression reflects cognitive growth. However, the scale has been endorsed as part of the movement toward oral proficiency testing in the schools, a movement encouraged by the "Guidelines" of the ACTFL. It is contended here that it would be premature to discard the proficiency test altogether, but further research into its applicability for school settings is necessary. The positive effects that the proficiency movement has had on teaching cannot be ignored, but there is no necessary link between: (1) use of the oral proficiency test and a focus on communicative language teaching; and (2) meaningful language use. A 41-item list of references is included. (SLD)

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PROFICIENCY AND THE SCHOOLS

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PROFICIENCY TESTING AND THE SCHOOLS

The ACTFL/ETS oral proficiency scale represents an adaptation of the governmental Foreign Service Institute scale. One of the aims in drawing up the ACTFL/ETS scale was to adapt the lower points of the FSI scale towards use in the academic environment. By making the scale more sensitive at the lower end it was hoped to offer a measurement of the levels of proficiency likely to be found among undergraduates and high school students.

All of this is well known, but it is worth remarking that a somewhat similar procedure to that adopted by ACTFL/ETS had been used in the early years of the FSI scale. At this stage, FSI raters were empowered to grant minus as well as plus marks throughout the scale. According to Jones (1979, 105) "The minuses were later dropped, since it was found that the scale had become so refined that it was really not possible to make so many discriminations". Though discontinued at FSI, the practice of devising three gradations for a particular level was adopted by ACTFL/ETS. ACTFL/ETS proceeded to subdivide the two lowest rungs of the FSI ladder, levels 0 and 1, into Low, Mid and High. Higgs (1984) describes the informal study carried out at the Educational Testing Service in 1979 which provided the major empirical backing for the innovation. ETS staff conducted oral interviews with 30 high school students. None was found to reach FSI level 1. Some were 0+ but most rated at 0. For Higgs,

these findings confirmed the hypothesis that the lower end of the scale did not effectively discriminate and that extra subdivisions were necessary. Apart from this rather tenuous empirical base for the decision--a study of 30 high school students--it is not apparent that much further research was conducted before the new scale was issued. Certainly, Liskin-Gasparro's (1987) wide-ranging account of the history of the ACTFL procedure pays little attention to the question of the process by which the scales were drawn up. Her reference to the creation of the new ACTFL subdivisions is just one paragraph long (p.21). In this she briefly describes what she terms the "informal study" which purportedly validated the Low/Mid subdivisions.

Leaving aside the shaky empirical status of the design of the ACTFL scale, it is questionable whether the objective of achieving greater sensitivity has been truly achieved by the changes. We now have six possible levels towards the bottom, as distinct from four in the FSI scale, hardly a dramatic increase in sensitivity. And one of the levels, Novice Low, is defined in terms which describe a level of proficiency so minimal that it is of no interest to anybody. The new distinctions achieved a little higher in the ACTFL scale, such as that between Intermediate Low and Intermediate Mid, are unlikely to account for any substantial difference in the way a person's proficiency is viewed. It seems improbable that anyone would post an Intermediate Mid requirement for a job or as a measure of academic achievement, and disqualify those who had only attained

Intermediate-Low. In other words, it is not clear that the distinction is genuinely meaningful outside the classroom. If this is the case, it hardly justifies the expansion of the lower end of the FSI scale and all the subsequent fuss.

The top point on the ACTFL scale is also quite problematic for several reasons. How applicable is the scale to adolescent students ? How much of the scales' progression reflects cognitive growth ? There is abundant evidence that the kinds of linguistic operations called for at the high end of the ACTFL scale are actually cognitive and developmentally decided. In the first language, we know that logical ability increases with age during adolescence (Byrnes and Overton 1988) as do scores on verbal reasoning (Sternberg and Downing 1982). Similarly, scores on syllogistic reasoning tests can increase even through the teens (Sternberg 1979, Tallin et al. 1974), as does the ability to comprehend metaphorical speech (Kogan et al. 1980). Nippold and others (Nippold 1988, 220) found that the ability to understand ambiguity increases through the late teens. In other words, many of the skills needed to achieve a score of Superior on the ACTFL scale are skills that are still only being acquired by adolescents in their first language. The Superior speaker is supposedly able to "participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional and abstract topics and (can) support opinions and hypothesize using native-like discourse strategies." How many adolescents fit this description in their first language ? Even the ability to narrate, supposedly typical, not of

Superior but of Advanced level, is still in first language developmental flux throughout the teen-age years (Nippold 1988, 253-58).

We thus need to ask how well adolescents would do on an OPI in their own language. Would they score at the highest point, Superior ? Unfortunately, there are no published findings on how the proficiency interview handles speakers of any age in their first language. The test sets out to measure how non-natives perform, but it has never found out how natives perform. We might be forgiven for presuming that a person will always score at the highest level in his native language, but this is not necessarily so. The ideal represented by Level 5 of the FSI scale, the "educated native speaker" is one that is attained by few. Lowe maintains that only a minority of native speakers qualify for the highest ratings; "ILR experience shows that the majority of native speakers of English probably fall at level 3" (1987, p.8). If most native speakers score at level 3 (Superior) we must presume that some, perhaps many, score below this; certainly this possibility is often raised in ACTFL/ETS training sessions. And if this is the case for adults, it must be even more so for adolescents. If the top of the scale is in reality inaccessible to adolescents in their native language, as it undoubtedly is to pre-adolescents, is this the kind of scale we want to use in the high school ?

Despite the lack of evidence that the scale is validly applicable to the school setting, the proficiency movement has had a significant impact on curricula and testing at the high

school level in many states (Cummins 1987). Magnan (1986, 433) tells us that "Wisconsin has recently published a new curriculum guide for secondary education, based in large part on the ACTFL Proficiency guidelines. The guide suggests a range of novice-high to intermediate low for the second years of high school instruction" and Intermediate-low to Intermediate-High for 3rd and 4th year. Gutierrez (1988, 916) reports that "Many of the (states') curriculum guides for foreign languages are couched in jargon that is taken, verbatim, from the ACTFL Guidelines. In Virginia, for example, the document ... has Intermediate-High as the exit requirement for speaking at the end of the fourth year of high school language study." A growing number of foreign language texts, particularly at elementary level, claim to reflect a proficiency-oriented methodology. Indeed the scales have acquired the status of an oracle in some circles: Levine, Haus and Cort (1987) worry because they find that language teachers' judgments of their students' ability do not concur with those of ACTFL raters. They never raise the question of how canonical those very ACTFL ratings may be--indeed what does it mean to make an "accurate" judgment of a person's proficiency. Incidentally, it is worth pointing out that Levine and his colleagues did NOT use the Superior level in their study, because they realized that none of their students would make this level.

Not just the student but also others involved in education may be affected by the Guidelines. Dwyer and Hiple (1988) mention such applications of the ACTFL procedure as in the awarding of grants, admission to Summer Institutes or

qualification for funding. Millman (1988), outlining an Alabama Commission on Higher Education grant for foreign study, mentions that the grant requires "that recipients have pre- and post-grant proficiency ratings as a measure of accountability". Hiple and Manley (1987, 153) describe how Texas is making the attainment of certain proficiency standards obligatory for teacher certification. The State Board of Education passed a measure that future foreign language teachers have their oral proficiency assessed "using procedures, criteria, and a passing score in accordance with the ACTFL guidelines". In short, the ACTFL scale is beginning to be used in real-life decisions of substantive importance to individuals.

Though proficiency scales exist for Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, the only modality for which an elicitation mechanism exists is the oral (interview). ACTFL has come up with no standardized format for measuring listening, reading or writing. This in itself is something of an anomaly, given the stress that ACTFL has placed on the training and certification of oral interviewers. It seems illogical to place such great emphasis on controlling through certification those who are supposedly trained to elicit and rate oral language while at the same time having no form of control, indeed no standardized format to follow, for those who are to elicit ability in other modalities.

Yet Glisan and Phillips (1988, 529), describing a Department of Education-funded program for the preparation of FLES teachers, state how expected language improvement for those

who participate in the program is to be defined. The prospective student teachers are supposed to develop skills in Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing as defined in terms of certain points on the ACTFL scales.

The goals of a part of the Glisan/Phillips program are given as Listening I-m, Reading I-l, Writing, I-l, Speaking, I-l. One has to ask how are these ratings to be made, since, as has been pointed out, we have no elicitation mechanism for anything other than Speaking. Were any participants to object to the score they received on any of these components, it is hard to see how the rating could be justified before any neutral party. For instance, Lee and Musumeci (1988) have shown that the reading levels do not exist as separate hierarchical entities. Elsewhere, even Phillips herself (1988, p.138), admits that some students don't necessarily have to go through the hierarchical stages posited for reading. She says that this is so because reading is not a natural skill;it is learned. Thus a person could score at Advanced before scoring at Intermediate, making a nonsense of the entire scale. The position is no better for another of the four skills. Valdes et al. (1988, 421) report a study which seems to show that real-life learners do not follow the ACTFL progression in listening comprehension either.

As a practical instrument, the ACTFL Guidelines have been quite successful in winning adherents, especially among administrators and supervisors. For some commentators, they have offered to provide an "organizing principle" (Higgs 1984),

a unified way of looking at the many divergent procedures and methodologies employed in the foreign language classroom. The agenda for conventions of foreign language teachers reflects the continued influence of the proficiency movement. Whatever the status of the scales with testing theorists and specialists, they continue to make the running in foreign language teaching. Decisions are being made on the basis of the ACTFL guidelines, and this trend may even accelerate in the next year or two. Indeed, Magnan (1988, 274) speaks of "strong suggestions that the OPI serve as a national proficiency examination".

Just a couple of years after the publication of the 1982 guidelines, Gasparro wrote that "although problems still remain, they are logistical rather than theoretical" (1984, p.39). Of course this was not the case then, and it is certainly not so now. Even in 1982, Frink, commenting on the initial efforts to adapt the FSI interview to the academic world, wrote (p.282) "although the FSI interview remains the best established test of oral proficiency, it is not necessarily the most readily applicable to high school and college students, even with a modified rating scale. It is based on the premise that the person being interviewed is an adult who will work abroad and assesses ability to function professionally in the target language. Many high school and college students are not yet equipped with any professional vocabulary or with the experience and self-assurance to perform professional-level language tasks". Hummel (1985, 14), another early critic of the ACTFL procedure, believed that the guidelines "fail to

distinguish between general cognitive skills that are independent of the level of proficiency in the target language and language skills that are related to achievement in the target language", a criticism that has still not been refuted. Stated otherwise, the scales reflect dualities such as Cummins' (1980) Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills/ Cognitive-Academic Language Proficiency dichotomy, or even Bernstein's (1971) hypothesis of the existence of separate "elaborated" and "restricted" codes. The ACTFL scale associates one group of language functions and contexts--what ACTFL would call a level (Advanced)--with cognitively undemanding, everyday uses of language, exercised in highly contextualized interpersonal situations. Another level (Superior) is associated with academic learning and intellectual discourse, and it is not accidental which level places higher on the hierarchy. Generally, the language favored in the oral interview is what Spolsky in a slightly different context terms "the variety of academic language chosen as its ideal by the western literate tradition. The style is one that favors autonomous verbalization, that idealizes the communication to relative strangers of the maximum amount of new knowledge using only verbal means" (1984, p.43).

Lantolf and Frawley (1985) and Barnwell (1989) have attempted to show the specious nature of the proficiency scale's invocation of the native speaker. The ACTFL scale was conceived for and is oriented to a particular milieu, the US academic environment, where the majority of language learners are Anglophone monolinguals of a certain age-group. Note that, by now, seven years after their initial publication, ACTFL has

not yet translated the generic scales into even the most commonly tested languages such as Spanish and French. Since most people in France, Germany, Spain or Latin America do not know English they couldn't use the ACTFL scale. Can ACTFL predict what native speakers will do with the scale when the scale is inaccessible to the vast majority of native speakers ? A rather obvious requirement for validation of the claims about native speakers would be to provide versions which the native speakers could understand.

How effective, efficient, and valid is the process of ACTFL training and certification in the preparation of those who will administer the oral proficiency interview ? Investigations with the FSI scale show that a prolonged period of training does not appear to be necessary for this purpose. In the case of the ACTFL procedure, inter-rater reliability would hardly be compromised by the adoption of a less rigorous training process for those who are to use the test. Barnwell (1987) found that informally trained raters could reach a high degree of concordance in their ratings after a relatively brief period of practice with the ACTFL scale. It may be that the cost of the ACTFL/ETS training program is excessive, both in terms of time and money.

More fundamental than considerations of reliability are considerations of validity. How valid is the training process devised by ACTFL ? There are grounds for suspecting that the training of interviewer/raters involves a process of socialization and group identification with an interpretation of

the proficiency construct which is American rather than native speaker in origin. A proper set of studies of the validity of the test would have to face the problem of how to include a wider cross-section of raters, including those who would not ordinarily volunteer to take part in psycholinguistic experiments. As Politzer (1978) and Vann and others (1984) found, factors such as age and educational background have a significant effect on how raters view candidates' performance. Other considerations such as the raters' familiarity with the native language of the speaker, or previous exposure to learners from a particular foreign language background, have a heavy bearing on how errors are viewed (Gass and Varonis 1984). It seems possible that the more language testing involves native speakers, with all their differing attitudes, prejudices and idiosyncrasies, the more problematic will be the use of any blanket native speaker norm. Indeed, one study found that a sample of native speakers of Spanish in Barcelona were consistently more severe in their judgments of American students' performance on the OPI than were ACTFL-trained judges (Barnwell 1988). If natives are consistently more lenient, or more severe, in their judgments than are so-called testing experts, who are we to believe ? Are the experts wrong ? If so they are hardly experts. Are the natives wrong ? If so we had better rethink not just our tests but also our texts, indeed the methodologies we use and the orientation we give to our entire language programs.

Another psychometric deficiency in the scale is worth mentioning. The audience for proficiency, or persons with whom the speaker will have to interact in the foreign language, is given two separate characterizations in the Guidelines. At the lower end, the "sympathetic" nature of the interlocutor is invoked. Further up, references are made to the "native speaker". So two different norms are used; "sympathetic interlocutors" are not the same as "native speakers". But, however unamenable to definition the phrase "native speaker" may be, the "sympathetic interlocutor" is even more nebulous. Surely what we are really seeing in the term "sympathetic interlocutor" is no more than a circumlocution for "classroom teacher", since one can think of few other non-native interlocutors likely to be encountered by speakers at the lower levels. This certainly is the impression one receives in reading Galloway's (65-69) treatment of the topic. Though she offers several pages on interlocutor characteristics, she restricts herself to considering the roles of teacher or interviewer. She fails to address the psychometric problems involved in defining the "sympathetic interlocutor". If "sympathetic interlocutors" are really just classroom teachers, then the scale should say so.

Several observers (Bart 1986, Kramsch 1986) believe that a stress on oral proficiency inevitably leads to a neglect of the many other objectives of foreign language learning, those values which traditionally provided the rationale for the place of foreign languages in the curriculum. Since it is a fact that only a small proportion of our students, be they high school or

college, will ever have much occasion to exercise their oral proficiency, should we be willing to define the goals of years of activity and study in terms of the needs of a minority ? If proficiency is communicative success, can we not look for a richer definition of communication, one that encompasses such things as communication with other peoples' pasts and present, the ability to derive pleasure and benefit from the great achievements in a foreign language and culture ?

There are millions of persons in this country who possess a command of a second language far in advance of anything we might impart to monolinguals in school or college. These are the bilingual speakers, and they represent a vast resource which has as yet been but little tapped. At a time when the education systems in several states are being swamped with children of non-English speaking background, there is a special need for some uniform, widely-accepted, and validated metric for the assessment of these children's skills in both languages. Equally, given the demand for bilingual teachers and social workers, for example, there is an urgent need to establish some means of gauging the extent of individuals' proficiency in the languages they claim to know. These speakers present a particular profile, obviously distinct from that of the Anglophone students of foreign languages. In the case of U.S. Hispanics, for instance, only a small proportion have received all their education in Spanish. Hence their opportunities to acquire and practice the academic and intellectual register required for Superior level have been restricted. Though they

may speak Spanish in diverse situations at home and at work, and function perfectly well in the language, they will not always attain the rating of Superior in their own language.

It might be countered, in objection to some of the points raised here, that we are ignoring the positive effects that the proficiency movement has had in teaching practices and texts. However, there is no necessary link between the ACTFL proficiency test and the focus on communicative language teaching, meaningful language use, and authentic materials that characterizes some of our best classes at any level. Indeed, parallel practices to these can be found in foreign language teaching in Europe today, even though the proficiency movement is almost unknown there. Language teaching in the U.S. in the 1970s was already evolving in the direction that the proficiency movement has sought to claim as its own. Witness the debate about "communicative competence" that predates the publication of the ACTFL Guidelines. This trend would surely have been maintained throughout the 1980s, regardless of whether ACTFL had ever published its Guidelines.

It would be premature to endorse the view articulated by Lantolf and Frawley (1988), that the proficiency test is so fundamentally flawed as to call for a moratorium on its use. Surely we should not quickly discard the FSI interview and the thirty-year tradition it embodies. But the research has to come first, and inflated claims must be refuted. Had the ACTFL procedure been a drug or domestic appliance it would long ago have been withdrawn from the market, since its proponents have

supplied no proof that it does what it claims to do. It is all development, and no research. In the foreign language teaching profession practice has often lagged behind theory. In the case of "proficiency", however, perhaps it has been the other way around. It's time to slow down, reflect a while, and give the theory time to catch up.

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